Perception and Digital Media in India

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the body politics at the center of both business services outsourcing labor (also termed affective, immaterial, or communicative labor) and the value-adding digital image in contemporary Indian media. The author uses a “media assemblage” method in this analysis, which brings together a critique of emerging forms of communicative labor, digital image technologies, and the changing capacities of the body, or affect. This paper is concept, following the critical approach methodology, and interprets findings rather than predicts them. Numerous feminist investigations analyzing the potentials within what has been designated traditionally as women’s work, have grasped affective labor with terms such as kin work and caring labor. Through an analysis of the Hindi-Bollywood film No Smoking (Kashyap, 2008), and the documentary Office Tigers (Mermin, 2006), the author explores the emergence of a digital vision in the South Asian context through pervasive processes that are “informatizing” various forms of life and work. They correlate the function of this digital vision in both business outsourcing and digital media through analyses of two key modalities: the evolving functionality of information in computer technology; and the modulation of subjectivity in the capacities of attention and sensation of value creation.

Keywords: Affect, Digital Media, Electronic Commerce, India, Information Systems, Value Added

1. THE LITERATURE AND METHOD OF MEDIA ASSEMBLAGE ANALYSIS

This essay brings together a set of researches into the “life” of digital media in India today. My ethnographic research into contemporary digital media in Mumbai, Delhi, and Bhopal confirms that the adoption of, for instance, the mobile phone in the major metros is increasingly focused on connectivity to various information platforms (Internet, governmental, regional, gaming, etc.) (Hardt, 1999), displacing voice telephony as its most important function. In India these mobile information connectivities ingress into more and more intercalated bodily and cultural processes (Whitehead, 1979, pp. 48, 62, 219-221). (The data collected through this research was conducted through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires of around 100 subjects, all of which were qualitatively interpreted and corroborated through follow-up interviews.) Given these dynamics, the human-mobile-perception assemblage in fact is a historic potentialization of actualized forms of habit. Through the work on habit in modern critical theory, we can situate two autonomous but feedbacked processes: 1) the

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strategic and contingent joining together or “ingressions” of flows of information, value, and sensation in the formation of personhood, and 2) the subjective experience of capitalist habitation (Ansell-Pearson, 2002; Bergson, 1988; Deleuze, 1988a; Nietzsche, Geuss, & Speirs, 1999). In other words, perceptual ingress opens the human onto a world of potentializing becoming as the increasing quantity of connectivities contracts into a qualitative change in perception, memory, and sensation; it is precisely this potentializing of the habited body that has been the target of contemporary marketing in the mobile phone industry in India. From a feminist point of view it is clear that this dialectic between freedom and control at the level of discourse functions to obscure a more fundamental set of processes that are transforming the embodied experience of mobile networks. These experiences are shaped by gender, class, communal, and sexual identities, norms, structures of feeling, and aesthetic styles.

Before we proceed further, I briefly review the relevant literature in the field. This essay engages with the forms of analysis of media assemblages that draw on both interpretive and empirical research into the changes in perception and consumption in digital cultures in India. The work on critical media ecologies (Balsamo, 1996; Brosius & Butcher, 1999; Clough & Halley, 2007; Fuller, 2004; Hansen, 2004; Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 2005; Manovich, 2001; Massumi, 1993; McLuhan, 1964; Menon & Nigam, 2007; Puar, 2007; Sundaram, 2009) has provided specific tools for this analysis. The first is the feminist analysis of the body-in-media. The cyberfeminist tradition that continued to develop the research into the cyborg begun by Donna Haraway and Anne Balsamo, the work on affect as capacity in the feminist materialism of Elizabeth Grosz and Patricia Clough, and the queer assemblages of Jasbir Puar have been involved in the articulation of a new feminist politics of information technology. This new feminist method does not limit itself to analyzing the female body in the patriarchal regime of code, but rather critiques various modes of control, subjugation, and furthers experiments in creation or freedom of heterogeneous bodies-in-becoming. Anna Munster powerfully draws on this tradition as she writes, “At one limit or pole, we find the potential directions in which a flow of matter moves or can be organized. Here, a set of exchanges is laid out that describes all of the possible relations a flow might enter into: what capacities and functions allow the movement of this flow into a specific or more localized material formation, such as a particular technical machine” (Munster, 2006, p. 13).

The second important tool emerging from this literature is a focus on habit and its ecologies. In the work of critical theorists of modern mass media (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999; Berardi, Meccchia, & Stivale, 2008; Castells, 2006; Clark, 2003; de Souza e Silva, 2006; Guattari, 2005; Hjorth, 2008; Kracauer & Levin, 1995; Niranjana, 1992; Srivastava, 2007), the repetitions built into the routinization of work after Fordism, and the generalization of information technologies across all forms of labor and consumption, has collapsed the world of work and leisure, and consequently brought more and more once “private” habits into the realm of capitalist value and forms of personhood. For feminist theorists this has also signaled the global shift toward affective labor, and “caregiving” as a decisive form of value production in post-Fordist capitalism (Dowling, 2007; Federici, Caffentzis, & Alidou, 2000; Fleming & Sturm, 2011; Lorber & Moore, 2002; Luxton & Bezanson, 2006; Smith, 1995; Sommers, Shields, MacLean, & Older Women’s League (U.S.). Task Force on Caregivers, 1987). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s work on “human capital” (Foucault, 2008) this critical tradition sees the formation of habits in the realm of the digital closely tied to new emergent forms of home based labor (Staples, 2006), entrepreneurship (Hanlon, 2012), and social networking (Gane & Beer, 2008).

Finally, the contemporary feminist theorization of affect, for instance in the work of Patricia Clough, Jasbir Puar, and Luciana Parisi, has greatly benefitted our understanding of...
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